

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	90
Land:	Belarus
Kilde:	Freedom House
Titel:	Freedom in the World - Belarus (2008)
Udgivet:	1. juli 2008
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	16. september 2008



Freedom in the World - Belarus (2008)

Capital:
Minsk

Population:
9,700,000

Political Rights Score: 7
Civil Liberties Score: 6
Status: Not Free

Overview

Now serving his third presidential term, Alyaksandr Lukashenka continued to repress all forms of potential opposition in 2007, including nongovernmental organizations, independent media outlets, and educational establishments. The authorities particularly targeted the Youth Front, refusing to register the group and detaining and harassing several key members. The fragmented opposition political parties barely survived during the year and failed to parlay popular grievances against the regime into a broad coalition. Meanwhile, Lukashenka's regime was losing the political and economic backing it once received from Russia, which now demands higher prices for its oil and gas. However, Belarus remained unable to develop better ties with the West due to its atrocious human rights record.

Belarus declared independence in 1991, ending centuries of foreign control by Poland, Russia, and the Soviet Union. Stanislau Shushkevich, a reform-minded leader, served as head of state from 1991 to 1994. That year, voters made Alyaksandr Lukashenka, a member of parliament with close links to the country's security services, Belarus's first post-Soviet president. He pursued efforts at reunification with Russia and subordinated the government, legislature, and courts to his political whims while denying citizens basic rights and liberties. A 1996 referendum, highly criticized by domestic monitors and the international community, adopted constitutional amendments that extended Lukashenka's term through 2001, broadened presidential powers, and created a new bicameral parliament (the National Assembly).

In October 2000, Belarus held deeply flawed elections to the Chamber of Representatives, the parliament's lower house. State media coverage of the campaign was limited and biased, and approximately half of all opposition candidates were denied registration. Following a boycott by seven opposition parties, only three opposition candidates were elected.

Lukashenka won a controversial reelection in September 2001 amid accusations by former security service officials that the president was directing a government-sponsored death squad aimed at silencing his opponents. Four politicians and journalists who had been critical of the regime disappeared during 1999 and 2000. Western observers judged the election to be neither free nor fair. On election day, Lukashenka declared himself the victor with 75 percent of the vote, while opposition candidate Uladzimir Hancharyk was credited with 15 percent. However, independent nongovernmental exit polls showed that Lukashenka had received 47 percent of the vote and Hancharyk 41 percent, an outcome that by law should have forced a second round. By 2002, Lukashenka had launched a campaign of

political retribution against those who had opposed him during the presidential campaign.

Legislative elections and a parallel referendum on the presidency were held in October 2004. The Central Election Commission claimed that 90 percent of voters took part in the plebiscite, with some 79 percent of them endorsing the government's proposal to allow Lukashenka to run for a third term in 2006. According to official results, not a single opposition candidate entered the National Assembly. A monitoring effort by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) declared that the parliamentary elections fell "significantly short" of Belarus's OSCE commitments. An independent exit poll found that just 48.4 percent of eligible voters backed the referendum.

Ukraine's Orange Revolution, unfolding only five weeks after the Belarusian constitutional referendum, raised the regime's concerns that a similar protest movement could occur in Minsk. Lukashenka boosted the law enforcement agencies in 2005 and purged their ranks of potential dissenters. Amendments to the Law on Interior Troops introduced in February 2005 allowed for the discretionary use of firearms against protesters on orders from the president.

The March 19, 2006, presidential elections, in which Lukashenka won a third term, were neither free nor fair, and the OSCE declared that the voting did not meet democratic standards. Although four candidates competed, Lukashenka's victory was clear from the start. The government took harsh repressive measures against the opposition, detaining and beating many campaign workers, including Alyaksandr Kazulin, one of the opposition candidates. Though there were no reliable exit polls, the opposition asserted that Lukashenka could not have won the 83 percent of the vote that he claimed.

The elections provoked the largest public protest of Lukashenka's tenure, bringing 10,000 to 15,000 activists onto Minsk's October Square on election day. Between 500 and 1,000 individuals were arrested on March 25, including Kazulin. He remained in prison at the end of 2007, serving out a sentence of five and a half years for protesting the flawed elections and the subsequent crackdown. Most other protesters received sentences of 15 days or less. Opposition activity dwindled after the protests, and political prisoners remain behind bars.

The regime continued to harass its opponents throughout 2007. The strategy seemed to be to jail opposition leaders while intimidating rank-and-file members with fees and warnings. The authorities particularly cracked down on the Youth Front, whose leader, Zmitser Dashkevich, was sentenced to 18 months in jail in November 2006. Repeated attempts to register the group have failed, meaning activists face up to two-year prison terms for participating in its operations. Many members were given short jail sentences and other punishments for taking part in unauthorized demonstrations and gatherings, such as book readings and distributing illegal literature. On August 22, the police broke up a theater performance by the group Free Theater, which had been banned from performing in Belarus and, on December 12, they disbanded a rally protesting the possible merger of Belarus and Russia.

The opposition failed to unite behind a common leader at the Congress of Democratic Forces, held May 26–27. Delegates removed Alyaksandr Milinkevich as head of the Political Council of the United Democratic Forces and replaced him with

four cochair. The authorities initially tried to prevent the congress from taking place but relented under foreign pressure. With its numerous internal divisions, the opposition has not been able to channel popular grievances against the regime into unified political action.

Russia has ratcheted up pressure on Belarus, demanding that it pay higher prices for natural gas and oil imports and sell a 50 percent stake in the gas transport system to Gazprom, the Russian state-owned energy giant. The increased pressure on the Belarusian economy could weaken Lukashenka's hold on power, but there were no signs that the economy or the regime were faltering in 2007. Belarusian overtures to the West have fallen flat due to the country's poor human rights record. During the year, Minsk looked farther abroad for allies and energy imports, receiving visits from Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Belarus is not an electoral democracy. Serious and widespread irregularities have marred all recent elections.

The National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus is composed of two houses. The 110 members of the Chamber of Representatives are popularly elected for four years on the basis of single-mandate constituencies. The upper house, the Council of the Republic, consists of 64 members serving four-year terms; 56 are elected by regional councils and 8 are appointed by the president. The constitution vests most power in the president, giving him control over the government, courts, and even the legislative process by stating that presidential decrees have a higher legal force than the laws. The National Assembly serves largely as a rubber-stamp body. The president is elected for five-year terms, and there are no term limits.

As a result of the concentration of power in the hands of the president, political parties play a negligible role in the political process. Opposition parties have no representation in the National Assembly, while pro-presidential parties serve only formal functions. In 2007, the authorities threatened to revoke the registration of opposition parties that were planning to compete in the 2008 parliamentary elections. The January 14, 2007, local elections failed to give voters a choice, and the opposition declared that the outcome was falsified. There was minimal public participation.

Belarus was ranked 150 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2007 Corruption Perceptions Index because of the overall lack of transparency in the government. Russian influence was also detrimental. Nepotism is a growing issue; President Alyaksandr Lukashenka appointed his son Viktor to the Security Council in January 2007, giving the newcomer equal ranking with the leaders of the KGB and Interior Ministry. The recent arrests of various law enforcement officers and the head of the state-run oil refining company have little to do with any real crackdown on corruption and more likely reflect various clan battles among the elite.

The Lukashenka regime systematically curtails press freedom. The Committee to Protect Journalists listed Belarus as one of the 10 most censored countries in the world in May 2006. Libel is both a civil and a criminal offense. State media are subordinated to the president, and harassment and censorship of independent media are routine. Belarusian national television is completely under the control

and influence of the state and does not provide coverage of alternative and opposition views. The State Press Committee issues warnings to publishers for unauthorized activities such as distributing copies abroad or reporting on unregistered organizations; it also can arbitrarily shut down publications without a court order. The news bulletins and daily playlists of all FM radio stations are censored. The state-run press distribution monopoly refused in November 2005 to continue distribution of most of the country's independent newspapers.

Internet sites within the country are under the control of the government's State Center on Information Security, which is part of the Security Council, and their impact is limited. The authorities have filed criminal cases against bloggers and online media sites for alleged defamation and slander. On August 1, 2007, opposition politician Andrey Klimau was sentenced to two years in prison at a closed trial for publishing criticisms of the government on the internet. The next day, Lukashenka called for greater state controls over the internet.

Despite constitutional guarantees that "all religions and faiths shall be equal before the law," government decrees and registration requirements have increasingly restricted the life and work of religious groups. Amendments in 2002 to the Law on Religions provide for government censorship of religious publications and prevent foreign citizens from leading religious groups. The amendments also place strict limitations on religious groups that have been active in Belarus for fewer than 20 years. The government signed a concordat with the Belarusian Orthodox Church in 2003, and the church enjoys a privileged position. The authorities have discriminated against Protestant clergy and ignored anti-Semitic attacks, according to a U.S. State Department report. Lukashenka provoked an international scandal in October when he said "Jews do not care for the place they live" when describing conditions in the town of Bobruisk. Israeli officials condemned the remarks.

Academic freedom is subject to intense state ideological pressures, and institutions that use a Western-style curriculum, promote national consciousness, or are suspected of disloyalty face harassment and liquidation. Official regulations stipulate the immediate dismissal and revocation of degrees for students and professors who join opposition protests. On Sunday, March 25, 2007, some universities scheduled exams to prevent students from participating in anti-Lukashenka rallies commemorating Freedom Day, the anniversary of the country's 1918 declaration of independence prior to absorption by the Soviet Union. Wiretapping by state security agencies limits the right to privacy.

The Lukashenka government limits freedom of assembly by critical independent groups. Protests and rallies require authorization from local authorities, who can arbitrarily withhold or revoke permission. When public demonstrations do occur, police typically break them up and arrest participants.

Freedom of association is severely restricted. More than a hundred of the most active nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) were liquidated or forced to close down from 2003 through 2005. In December 2005, Lukashenka signed into law amendments to the criminal code that criminalized participation in an unregistered or liquidated political party or organization, allowing further punitive measures against groups that refused to shut down. As a result, most human rights activists operating in the country face potential jail terms ranging from six months to two years.

New regulations introduced in August 2005 ban foreign assistance to NGOs, parties, and individuals who promote “meddling in the internal affairs” of Belarus from abroad. In January 2007, the authorities threatened to throw the Belarusian Helsinki Committee out of its offices but relented under pressure from Western countries and rights groups. The organization remains under threat of closure. Independent trade unions are subject to harassment, and their leaders are frequently arrested and prosecuted for peaceful protests and dismissed from employment.

Although the country’s constitution calls for judicial independence, courts are subject to significant government influence. The right to a fair trial is often not respected in cases with political overtones. The police in Belarus use excessive force, according to UN Special Rapporteur Adrian Severin. Human rights groups continue to document instances of beatings, torture, and inadequate protection during detention in cases involving leaders of the democratic opposition.

An internal passport system, in which a passport is required for domestic travel and to secure permanent housing, limits freedom of movement and choice of residence. On December 17, Lukashenka lifted a requirement for citizens to obtain a travel permit before going abroad, effective from the beginning of 2008. At the same time, the government created a database that will include nearly 100,000 people who cannot leave the country. The country’s command economy severely limits economic freedom.

Ethnic Poles and Roma often face discrimination. Women are not specifically targeted for discrimination, but there are significant discrepancies in income between men and women, and women are poorly represented in leading government positions. As a result of extreme poverty, many women have become victims of the international sex-trafficking trade.